

William Morris as a Mannerist

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Abstract

This paper boldly attempts to re-evaluate William Morris, a famous British artist, fantasy writer, and activist of socialism during the Victorian Era, as an inheritor of *Manierismo*, which originated in Florence, Italy in the 16th century and spread to many areas of central and northern Europe. The supporting pieces of evidence on which I rely to compose my idea are the following four suppositions. First, it is his cherished dream from childhood nostalgia for the Middle Ages when every craftsman used to create handmade arts individually. Second, Morris's lower appraisal of imported Japanese paintings that he saw in London might have stemmed from his disapproval of the hidden Renaissance circular and linear structures in them. Third, it was Edgar Allan Poe, in association with Karl Marx, that fortuitously influenced Morris through his grotesque depictions of alienation to emphasize another reality lurking beneath everyday life. My approach seems to be based on mere intuition, but the encounter with the Gothic Revival, which could be presented as an additional verification to wrap up the research, is the more intriguing foundation. My literary design has been inspired through the spire of a medieval cathedral, leading me to the power of serpentine lines.

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Before I dwell on the above-mentioned keywords, let me start with one of the famous tapestries of William Morris (hereafter Morris) as an introduction. It is *The Flora tapestry* designed by Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, his co-worker in 1885 as a product of his own decorating firm, Morris & Co.

The woman standing barefoot in the center is Flora, the goddess of abundance, wearing summer garments with a wreath around her head. She is holding flowers in her hands. She seems to dominate the intricate floral background.



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Having a glance at the beautiful figure, together with the plants and small animals in the well-arranged framework does not find anything idiosyncratic in a Pre-Raphaelite mode. A closer and continuous observation, however, would incur another emotion, which could turn into labyrinthine anxiety.

Each banner at the top and the bottom respectively, on which the part of Morris's poem is printed, is wrinkled to make readers annoyed to follow the words. Consequently, the message that the lyric is supposed to convey is blurred. The tangible has turned into the intangible.

This is the door to enter the world of Morris in *Manierismo* (hereafter Mannerism), which will lead you to the conclusion of my paper if you dare to open it.

1. Mannerism

Everything vegetal here is strong, ...

The Island of the Day Before, Umberto Eco

Although the design of *The Flora tapestry* simply conveys harmony of the feminine deity and the nature, it seems to me that this artifact is a typical example of *bravura*, “a triumphant conjuring trick, a firework display with flying sparks and colours” as suggested by Arnold Hauser in the English version of *Der Manierismus. Die Krise der Renaissance und der Ursprung der modernen Kunst*.

Morris intentionally avoided the shape of circle, a symbol of the perfection. The curves he drew are not only slightly elongated but undulated as well, quite different from geometrical designs based on rationalism nurtured during the Renaissance. Consequently, the contours are more remarkable and more daunting to assert their presence than a simple combination of circular lines does. The body of Flora is also vertically drawn-out, showing a prolonged letter S, from the head to the left foot via the extended left arm.

As far as the space to avoid visual suffocation is concerned, it is worse than that of Rosso Fiorentino's *Moses and the Daughters of Jethro*. Even this famous masterpiece of Mannerism shows a small piece of the blue sky behind the disturbed bodies.



Because of that lack of space in Morris's work, the birds and rabbits also look frozen like stuffed animals. Consequently, audible sounds in nature are not psychologically

heard, making the whole impression lifeless.

The spuriously depicted leaves, tendrils and ivies behind the goddess are so thickly imbricated that it is impossible to see through them, creating the sense of *horror vacui* or aversion to whiteness. They are spuriously crafted in such a way that even fresh air is prohibited to flow in.

Trapped in the closed space, the female icon is apparently standing, but since the ground is not drawn, she looks like “floating”. It certainly ignores the inborn fear of falling. This buoyant impression reminds me of Parmigianino's *Madonna with the Long Neck*.



The other wallpaper and tapestry designs created by Morris seem to be very silent as well, as if he had purposefully muffled the sounds of nature with layers of static leaves and flowers although they are apparently symbols of life. This lifeless drawing leads me to believe that Morris did not intend to showcase the active beauty of nature but to entomb the anxiety of real life.

He obviously commercialized his design by placing the Goddess of luxuriance in the center of the frame, but he unconsciously came to present the sense of barrenness because he was anxious about his private life at the bottom of his mind as a decent husband, and at the same time dissatisfied with the social condition, which was under the oppressive influence of remarkable mechanization of production.

He had found his isolated emotion shared with that of Edgar Allan Poe (hereafter Poe) in his grotesque and arabesque works. His metaphors created intangible images.

“Abstraction is born though the struggle between painting-centered and construction-

oriented attitudes” remarked by Gustav René Hocke (hereafter Hocke) in the Japanese-translated version of *Die Welt als Labyrinth-Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst* in 1957.

Morris, unlike Joris-Karl Huysmans (hereafter Huysmans), was not obsessed too much with symbolism because he had a constructive desire to establish an ideal society based on socialism. This is a part of the reason why his artistic style as a designer submersed the decadent current of Mannerism.

Morris became a utopian advocate of socialism courageously and visibly while his designs humbly paved the way for the Arts and Crafts Movement. It seems to me that he was boasting himself as *homo faber*, who evaluated consciously personal approaches with handheld tools. The prevalent artistic view, however, based on rationalism developed during the Renaissance imposed geometrically arranged perspective on the eyesight of 19th century artists, leading them to imitate nature mechanically.

On the other hand, Morris devoted himself to drawing things natural in such a way that he showed his unconscious manifestation that artists should not lose sight of real nature as if he had read and appreciated the demand of Federico Zuccarie, a 16th century Italian Mannerist painter and architect, remarked by Hocke.

As to the wallpapers of Morris’s creation, many of which are still on the market and popular, were designed as indoor decorations. He apparently recapitulated flowers and leaves, without associating their physical location away from the natural environment. These meticulously crafted two-dimensional imitations enhanced their abstract quality, which could not be obtained by geometrically drawn Renaissance paintings. This borderline between the semblance depicted by Morris and the visible reality in forests is the Mannerist conception of life. William Morris

unintentionally succeeded in making Mannerism into a household fashion during the Victorian Era.

His desire to introduce the atmosphere of thick forest into the home was born through his adoration for the medieval world.

2. Middle Ages

Money was no use in the forest.

The Pillars of the Earth, Ken Follett

Our common understanding of the medieval period during the 20th century used to be a biased concept that it was the Dark Ages. Kenneth Clark (hereafter Clark), a British art historian, once wrote, “To the eighteenth century the middle age was a foggy sea with but one landmark - the Norman Conquest - round which the Gothic cathedrals drifted like rudderless ships” in *The Gothic Revival*. Michael Crichton, an American bestselling writer, reconfirmed such a misunderstanding by indicating it was once thought to be static, brutal and benighted in “the Acknowledgements” in his time-travel novel, *Timeline*.

The Middle Ages, however, was the bygone acarida for Morris, and such an emotion is also shared with the spirits of Mannerism as indicated by Hocke. “Mannerism must be an adoration of the Lost Paradise.” Umberto Eco also mentioned, “It is the movement of Mannerism that discovered the artists’ pride based on their own personality and originality.” in *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. This was the age when Morris could find a wonderfully simplified society for workers to make their participation and contribution more rewarding.

We must have a glimpse of his childhood days to find the roots of his inclination to the brilliant past. According to the report of Peter Stansky (hereafter Stansky) in his brief biography of Morris, when he was a small boy, he used to enjoy

riding a pony, dressed in a mock armor pretending to a knight in Epping Forest near his house, which still had the atmosphere of the past medieval world. The sense of romanticism which lasted through all his life must have sprouted at his tender age.

One of his favorite storytellers was Sir Walter Scott (hereafter Scott). It is reported that Morris read almost of all his major romance epics of medieval knights while he was young. Although Scott's historical novels cover several ages, from 12th century in *Ivanhoe* to 18th century in *Waverley*, young Morris must have adored the dreamy past of his country.

Scott should also be remembered as one of the key creators who promoted the movement of Gothic Revival. He was referred to, by Clark, as "the man who made the Catholic Revival in England." Morris might have empathized with the spiritual devotion of the Romantic novelist to the wonderful past while he was young.

Morris wrote some fantastic epics himself by imitating the works of Scott based on his childhood reading experience. *The Well at the World's End* is still a popular fantasy. In such an adventure describing a long journey through a magical imaginary countryside, a horse is supposed to be a very important means of transportation. The story begins with the riding of a horse named Falcon, the symbol of speed, but Ralph, the hero of the tale, loses it soon after his departure, a painful loss to him. Morris, however, would not need the fastest, reliable and efficient means of transportation, reflecting his adverse emotion against the development of locomotives.

Ironically, the power of horse was calculated into that of artificial engines. The average length of working time, although it was often extended at factories, was fixed as eight hours based on the common understanding that a horse was thought to be work for eight hours per day according to the description of Karl Marx (hereafter Marx).

It is obvious that Morris preferred the slow movement of people in the past to the expected rapid development of his own story, in which another horse was provided to Ralph, but he and his companion travelled through the forest slowly to the happy ending.

What Morris wished to reincarnate in his imagination is the medieval thought. It was primitive, but much closer to the existing nature which would not be compatible with Euclidean perfect circles, triangles, and straight lines. He psychologically admired wriggling struggle not only in creating visual arts, but also in composing his epics.

3. Hokusai

The existence of the most perfect circles of all had been disproved, ironically enough by a scientist who had felt the beauty and the mystery of the circle....

The Breaking of the Circle, Marjorie Hope Nicolson

Unfortunately, I have not yet confirmed that Morris mentioned the name of Katsushika Hokusai (hereafter Hokusai). I might as well need a careful perusal of Morris's diary. As a result, my analysis for this matter, for the time being, is entirely with a speculation based on the well-known facts regarding *Japonisme*, the cultural influence of Japanese art to famous Western European artists in the middle and late 19th century. Toward the end of Tokugawa shogun government, Japan had to open its ports to major Western nations, including the UK. Its isolation policy was finally over in 1854.

It is well-known that plenty of *ukiyo-e* paintings, including works of Hokusai, were exported to Europe while Japan was facing the forced Westernization. London International Exhibition on Industry and Art in 1862 boosted interests of

the public in imported Japanese artifacts. Some artists and painters were also attracted. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (hereafter Rossetti) was one of them. His relationship with Morris at that time was very friendly, so it is no wonder Morris would be provided with a chance to witness the beauty of Japan.

In fact, Morris participated in the exhibition as the representative of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. It was a good opportunity for his firm to proudly display their artistic products, but also for him personally to have a closer look at Japanese artifacts, some of which were purchased by another art designer, Christopher Dresser, Morris's competitor at that time. His commercial curiosity about Japanese things since then may have led Morris to intentionally ignore imported items from Japan, but there is a high possibility that he witnessed the works of Hokusai, which attracted attention from many British lovers of exotic artifacts in those days. Morris, however, did not think highly of them.

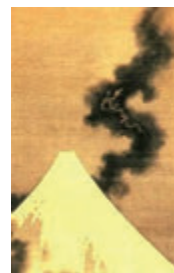
To the best of my knowledge, the basic shapes for architectural design are circle, square, and isosceles triangle. In other words, Hokusai, who designed his painting according to the well-arranged geometry, must have been a two-dimensional architect in a sense. This was where a lot of European people were enchanted by his works. Some of the enthusiasts might have seen the similar approach conducted by Leonardo da Vinci, but it was what Morris found difficult to accept.

The scientific breakthrough during the Age of Enlightenment had discovered that the shape of a perfect circle is absolutely a human invention and cannot naturally exist. Even the orbits of planets around the Sun, once believed to be divine, were confirmed to be elliptical.

With this new world-view Morris did not respect the works of this Japanese *ukiyo*e creator because of his reliance on this outdated

geometrically manipulated combination of artificial forms subject to gravity. It was also the cause that diverted Morris from the job for construction. He must have averted the attitude of 19th century architects who were satisfied with three-dimensional expressions based on the perspective bequeathed by the Renaissance.

Morris was a Mannerism-oriented creator, personally trying to escape his trauma. He must have felt a favorable impression on Hokusai if he had gazed at Hokusai's final work, *Dragon over Mt. Fuji* then.



The roots of Morris's anxiety were the social turmoil during the Victorian Era.

4. Poe and Marx

He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down.

“The Signal-Man”, Charles Dickens

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, the only novella of Poe, was first published in the UK in 1838. Morris must have read it while he was a boy since he was a voracious reader of romantic tales. Its bizarre impression might have been stayed deep in his subconsciousness as a nightmare for such a long time that he intuitively chose the most horrible scene from the story at the beginning of his introduction of socialism in *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome* to visibly emphasize the similar miserable situation rampant in British society. In the story, Pym was at a loss in the uncontrollable

ship even when a new day started, saying, “The dawn found us in a state of pitiable dejection as well as bodily exhaustion.”

Morris made the best use of Pym’s isolated and helpless situation to attract attention from readers, many of whom must have been dissatisfied with their life under the oppressive influence of a money-and-efficiency-oriented social system.

The reality of intolerable daily situations to workers, including children, were meticulously penned by Marx in *Capital*. Morris had begun to read it in its French translation in 1883 simply because the English version was not available yet at that time.

Let me quote three terrible depictions from its *Volume I*.

1. A tremendous railway accident has dispatched hundreds of passengers into the next world. The negligence of the railway workers is the cause of the misfortune. ...During the last five or six years, they say, it had been screwed up to 14, 18, and 20 hours, and when the pressure of holiday travellers is especially severe, when excursion trains are put on, their labour often lasted for 40 or 50 hours without a break.
2. The fearful increase in death from starvation during the last ten years in London runs parallel with the extension of machine sewing.
3. The great riches of a small number are always accompanied by the absolute deprivation of the essential necessities of life for many others.

Even without the influence of Marx, Morris must have been always concerned with wages of workers even though he was born in a rather wealthy family. “Hast thou perchance money” is the question that Ralph was asked at his departure to search for “the well at the world’s end”. This situation is too earthborn in such a fantasy world as far as the nature of story is

concerned. “Money” must have always stayed in Morris’s mind, considering the harsh reality of wage earners.

What is common between the minds of Poe and Marx is anxiety to alienation, which is supposed to be felt when people find themselves thrown into a boundary between a comfortably stable place and an unstable place. If the good example of the former is rigid architecture to ensure safety and the latter flexible art, the border is a place where abstraction emerges as indicated by Hocke. Since it discards the proportion nurtured during the Renaissance, it inevitably invokes the feeling of alienation. It is evident from this viewpoint why Morris did not like aliquot division of labor, which is apparently geometrical and structural.

Morris was also suffering from the sense of isolation because of unethical relation with his wife, Jane. Although he intentionally distanced himself while she was much closer to Rossetti, and later Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a politician, he continued their marriage status in his life. She might have turned into a *femme fatale* if Morris had become furious and violent, but Morris was a man of intellect, devoting his spiritual affection like a knight in the medieval chivalry.

One year after he married Jane Burden in Oxford in 1859, they moved into Red House, a new residence, romantically appropriate enough for the newly married couple. He believed it would be a paradise for them, but unfortunately his financial difficulties and problems of commuting to his workshop forced him to sell the house, although they had two daughters. He had started his own design business in 1861.

He faced difficulty to run the firm as the manager for the first time. This turmoil, however, helped him to open his eyes to the rapidly prevailing industrialization. While he evaluated the mechanization of production to some extent, what he hated most was a severe fact that the loss of identity of workers trapped in the division

of labor with the emphasis on efficiency to produce as many products as possible in an allocated time. He found a weird word “vampire” referring to capitalists sucking the blood of workers in *Capital Volume I*.

An adverse situation sometimes stimulates creativity. His endurance as a husband and socialism activist led him to another fiction. He published his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* subtitled *A Utopian Romance* in 1890 just soon after he read *Looking Backward : 2000–1887* written by Edward Bellamy, an American journalist, who depicted an industrial and commercial future state, controlling everybody and everything under the efficient centralized bureaucracy.

Morris detested the story even though it could be categorized in Science Fiction. His own futuristic tale was his adverse opinion against such a dystopian society. The ultimate goal of his future society is described in *News from Nowhere*. He had joined the Social Democratic Federation, a new revolutionary-socialist party in 1883.

The future society of his imagination would be a place where there are no masters, but everyone is a craftsman working for the pleasure of their works’ creativity, such as the buildings, clothes and artifacts, though dependent on no historical style, is closest in spirit to those of the fourteenth century.

Morris made his dream reality, at least in literature, by rejecting the extending capitalism, against which Marx articulated warnings to ordinary workers and citizens.

5. Gothic Revival

London deserved its fogs : they made a modern city Gothic, involving it in a murky half-light through which misty shapes can loom.

The Victorian Treasure-House, Peter Conrad

Gothic Revival is such a monumental concept historically and culturally that it is not adequate to introduce it as one of the evidences to support my logic. Condensing the fact, however, that Morris was an ardent supporter of the reincarnation of Gothic style architecture once, I cannot help but to mention his dedication to one of the few essential texts of the 19th century.

It is well reported that Morris joined the movement of Gothic Revival, which was initiated through the orientation of Catholicism admiring the moral medieval society in the UK, and boosted by re-evaluation of Gothic style architecture promoted by John Ruskin, an art critic, in his works of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*. “The Nature in Gothic” in the former, in particular, would energize Morris in later years.

When these influential books were published in 1849 and 1851-53 respectively, Morris was still in his teens, and reading them while he was at Oxford lay the foundation for him starting to work in architecture. After he left the office of G. E. Street, a leading Gothic architect, Morris changed his job into an interior-decorating business, starting Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (later Morris & Co.) at the age of 27 in 1861.

Behind his decision to change the career path, without considering his mother’s hope, is the existence of his one-year younger lifelong friend, Edward Coley Burne-Jones (hereafter Burne-Jones), who is now famous as a Pre-Raphaelite artist. They formed close friendships with each other at Oxford. One of the most remarkable experiences while he was a student was his trip to France with Burne-Jones. He visited several cathedrals. “The Gothic cathedrals of Amiens, Beauvais, Chartres and Rouen were revelations to him”, according to Stansky’s book.

It must have been an inspirational time for him, together with his companion, to resolve to step into the field of art as his vocation. It was a

godsend occasion. Stansky added how disappointed and distressed Morris's mother was when she heard his firm decision to dedicate himself to art rather than entering the priesthood. Her anticipation for the future of his son was denied. It was the birth moment of Morris as an artist.

What did Morris witness and feel inside the cathedrals? He might have sensed the atmosphere of medieval forests. This association reminds me of *The Cathedral* written by Huysmans, in which Chartes Cathedral is depicted. Durtal, the protagonist of the story, said, "To me it's almost certain that it was in the forest that man found this much-discussed prototype of the nave and the ogive. The most amazing cathedral that nature herself constructed with the prodigious pointed arch of its branches, is at Jumièges." Huysmans made this aesthetician mention the ruined 7th century abbey to emphasize the vision of Gothic church in a forest.

Another reason why Morris departed from construction proper is probably because although he appreciated the peak of Gothic Revival, it would have been difficult for him to evaluate and accept its unavoidable dependence on capitalist means of production, distribution and supply.

What encouraged him instead, as far as the connotation of revival was concerned, the psychological return to the society of the Middle Ages, where every craftperson had freedom of individual artistic expression by utilising hand-made tools skillfully. The symbol of the traditional interplay between the independent people and their community was the forest. In a sense, it was his radical departure from conventional Victorian attitudes to art, which evaluated the realism and rationalism under the influence of the Industrial Revolution. As Clark remarked, the mind of William Morris was colored by the Gothic Revival, transforming the drab Victorian drawing-rooms.

The memory of the medieval wild forest itself is the image of Mannerism, which allowed Morris to rely on disproportionately and unnaturally straggling lines to draw natural leaves and flowers, which became the artistic legacy of Morris.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Morris left ingenious imitation of nature rather than mere mechanical copy of it as Immanuel Kant made a sharp distinction.

This report has to be finished at this point due to the page limitation. What I have found through the research this time is that Morris should be categorised as a designer of Mannerism during the Victorian Era. The reason why Morris has not been discussed in terms of Mannerism so far is that the concept of Mannerism itself was forced to stay outside of the mainstream of the European artistic and cultural studies, as indicated by Hocke.

Even if Morris had known the word of Mannerism, he would not have recognized his artistic style along that line because its connotation was comprehended narrowly and despised as unproductive in those days. Even John Donne, the most discussed as a Mannerism poet recently, was categorized as metaphysical until 1920s.

Despite such a situation I am going to venture into the Mannerism-style literature of William Morris for further research. Let me quote one of the depictions from another of fantasy tales, *The Roots of the Mountain* to wrap up my research at this stage.

"The wood itself thereabout was thick, a blended growth of diverse kinds of trees, but most of oak and ash; light and air enough came through their boughs to suffer the holly and bramble and eglantine and other small wood to grow together into thickets, which no man could pass without hewing a way."

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